



James Rosenquist

March 3 – July 2, 2006

The exhibition is organized by the Miami Art Museum and curated by Assistant Director for Special Projects/Curator Lorie Mertes as part of *New Work*, a series of projects by leading contemporary artists.

CHECKLIST

The Brazilian Forest - The Flaming Archer and the Target 1987
Oil on canvas
66 x 87 inches
Private collection

Early Catapult 1994
Oil on canvas with wood, fabric, hardware, chromed barbed wire, magnets, and various objects
144 x 246 inches
Courtesy the artist and Acquavella Gallery, New York

The Meteor Hits Picasso's Bed 1996-99
Oil on canvas with burnt wood collage
100 x 93-1/2 inches
Courtesy the artist and Acquavella Gallery, New York

Untitled 2000
Oil on canvas
70 x 85 inches
Collection Judy and Sherwood Weiser

The Stars and Stripes at the Speed of Light 1999
Oil on canvas
60 x 42 inches
Bobbi and Stephen Berkman Collection

Voodoo Wedding 2002
Oil on canvas
84 x 63 inches
Courtesy the artist and Acquavella Gallery, New York

Brazil 2004
Oil on canvas
93 x 288-3/8 inches
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The Xenophobic Movie Director or Our Foreign Policy 2004
Oil on canvas
60 x 162 inches
Courtesy the artist and Acquavella Gallery, New York

Art © James Rosenquist. Text © Miami Art Museum

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Miami Art Museum



101 West Flagler Street
Miami, Florida 33130
305.375.3000
miamiartmuseum.org

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COVER *The Meteor Hits Picasso's Bed* 1996-99. Oil on canvas with burnt wood collage, 100 x 93-1/2 inches, Courtesy the artist and Acquavella Gallery, New York.
PHOTOS Page 1 George Holzer All other photos Peter Foe All images © James Rosenquist

Miami Art Museum

James Rosenquist: Traveling at the Speed of Light

This is the first museum exhibition of James Rosenquist’s work in the United States since his forty-year retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2003. The eight large-scale paintings included in the exhibition range in date from 1987 to 2004. Two of the most recent works, *Brazil* and *The Xenophobic Movie Director or Our Foreign Policy*, are being shown for the first time in this country. Both are stunning examples of Rosenquist’s signature style of painting on a massive scale, derived from his early experience as a commercial billboard painter.

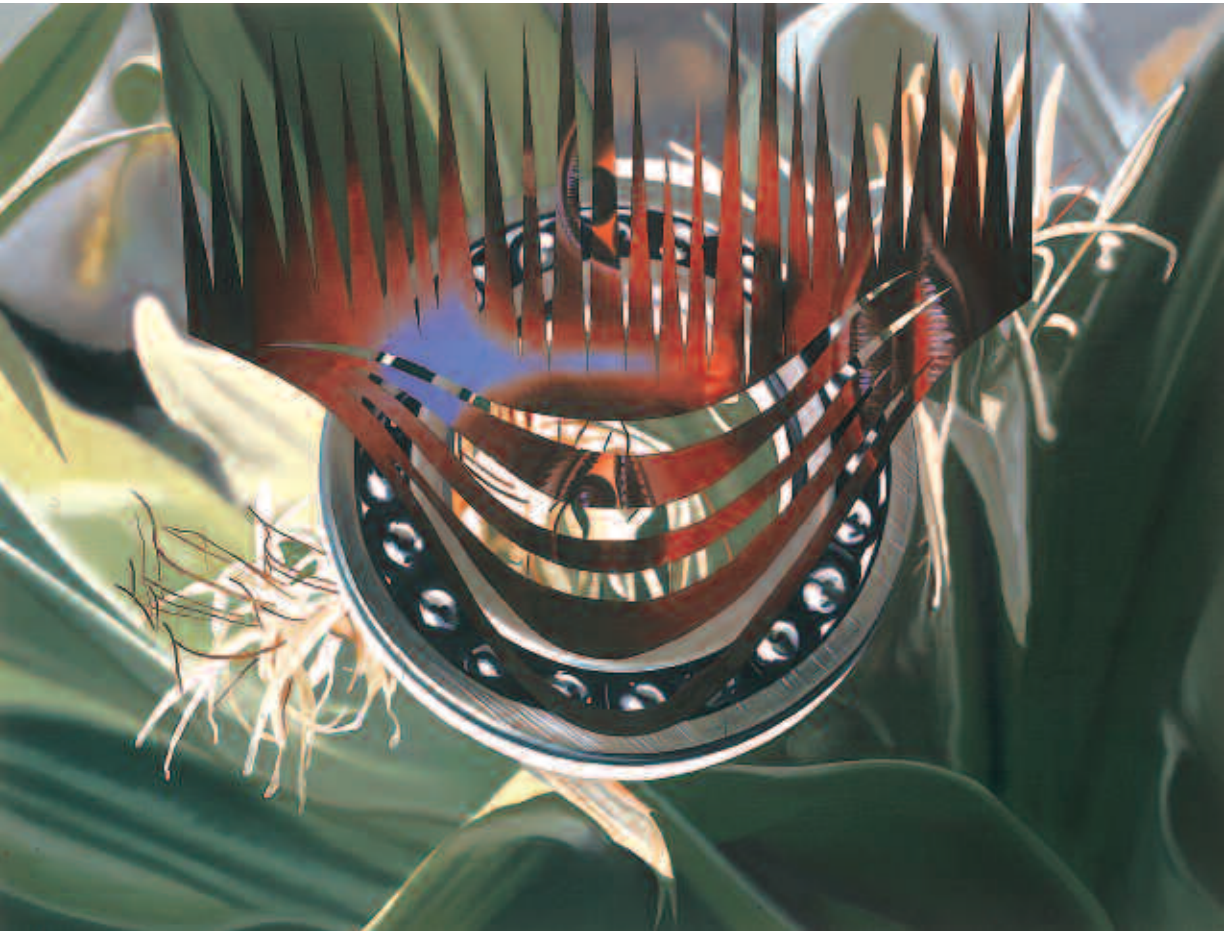
Themes that have been prevalent in Rosenquist's work throughout his career are evident in this exhibition: from paintings that explore social, political and economic issues from a global perspective to works that express the artist's ongoing fascination with space, technology and scientific theory. Binding them together is Rosenquist's unique painting style, which smoothly transitions from the hyper-real to the highly abstract, done without the aid of computers or any other technology. Fragmented imagery, fluctuations in scale, and shifts in spatial relationships, combine to create dynamic compositions that become exercises in perception, challenging the eye to take it all in.

In *The Brazilian Forest – The Flaming Archer and the Target* (1987) and *Brazil* (2004), Rosenquist explores cultural and economic issues in countries where industrialized nations have taken an interest. *The Flaming Archer* questions the fate of the indigenous people of Brazil in the wake of industrialization, wondering if theirs is a future of factory labor. Embedded in *Brazil*, the largest work in the exhibition, are images of what the artist considers representative of the amazing diversity of Brazil's population, natural resources, and cultural contributions. In the bottom right of the canvas, the spire of the Cathedral of Brazil designed by Oscar Neimeyer in 1958 symbolizes Brazil's modern architecture and alludes to the fact that Brazil is the world's largest Catholic country with seventy-five percent of the population identifying themselves as Catholic. The central portion of the painting teems with exotic imagery: a brightly plumed parrot, a jaguar, and a Carnival dancer. On the far left side of the canvas is a sky dotted with jewels, coffee beans, and an orange slice, referring to Brazil's major agricultural and

mining industries. The presence of archers, representing Brazil's indigenous people, calls attention to the social and economic extremes prevalent throughout the country.

Throughout his career, Rosenquist has made work that reflects the tenor of the times, chronicling major world events from the Cold War era to the present. Many of his most renowned works, such as *F-111* (1964-65) and *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist* (1997-98), have been compared to monumental historical narrative painting and such anti-war statements as Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). *F-111* is one of Rosenquist's largest works. At eighty-six feet long and ten feet high, the fifteen-panel piece was designed to wrap around the walls of Leo Castelli Gallery where it was first shown in 1965. Designed to continuously cover all available wall space, making it impossible to view from a single vantage point, *F-111* is an early exploration of the artist's interest in peripheral vision. The dominant image in *F-111* is the fuselage of the massive fighter bomber then under development by the military. Superimposed along the length of the plane are various consumer products that refer to the detachment of a consumer society fueled by the military-industrial complex.

The Xenophobic Movie Director or Our Foreign Policy (2004), in MAM's exhibition, recalls another well-known early work that calls attention to the connection between consumer society and politics. *President Elect* (1960-61/1964) juxtaposes a close up image of John F. Kennedy's face taken from a presidential campaign poster with images appropriated from magazine ads: the rounded fender of a 1949 Chevy and a woman's hands holding a slice of cake – symbols of middle-class affluence. Rosenquist recalls his reaction to seeing an



The Brazilian Forest - The Flaming Archer and the Target 1987
Oil on canvas
66 x 87 inches
Private Collection

image of Kennedy, the first presidential candidate to fully utilize mass media in his campaign: “I was interested at the time in people who advertised themselves. ...So here's this guy with copper skin, silver-red hair and wearing a baby blue suit and he looks great, so I'm wondering what is it he's promising?”

Painted some forty-years later, *The Xenophobic Movie Director or Our Foreign Policy* (2004) also casts a critical eye towards a presidential candidate. In the center of the painting are the legs of a figure posed in a recognizable golf stance. To the left is a tree stump wrapped in a U.S. flag upon which rests the skull of a longhorn steer. The figure stands on a field of numbers and appears to be in mid-swing. A single white filament connects the trajectory of the figure's swing to an

oversized lightbulb suspended in midair. On the bulb is an Arabic text, which, according to the artist translates as: “Praise God Creator of Our Worlds.” For Rosenquist this work refers to ignorance on the part of our leaders in regard to “what goes on in the minds of terrorists like those who attacked the U.S. on 9/11.” The artist wonders, “How can you direct a country if you are afraid of people or learning about things that are foreign?” Giving an example of what he sees as a disconnect, he cites the story of Salah a-Din, the twelfth-century Muslim warrior renowned for his leadership in recapturing Jerusalem in 1187 in a major battle against Christian crusaders. This was a monumental victory in what would be a centuries-old war against the Crusaders who, in the name of their religion, killed more than 200,000 Muslims and Jews over a 200-year period. Rosenquist points out

that this thirteenth-century event is evidently still in the minds of terrorists who claim to be a modern day Salah a-Din, a name that translates as “Righteousness of Faith.”

Over the years Rosenquist has made a number of paintings that focus on the subject of war and turmoil, examples include *The Flame Dances to the Mirror While the Charcoal Draws* (1993), which confronts ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the 1990s, and *The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie* (1994), which alludes to Berlin and the aftermath of World War II. These works offer ways of looking at a situation, posing questions rather than offering pat answers. The most pervasive question being: What happens when mankind forgets its past failures and transgressions? Will history repeat itself?

Inspired by a trip to Berlin in 1992, *Early Catapult* powerfully alludes to the perils of historical amnesia. The work – titled after one of man’s earliest weapons – consists of a large canvas precariously supported by a small, rounded canvas that serves as the point of balance, creating what is essentially a teeter-totter. The round canvas is wrapped in chrome-plated barbed wire, a symbol the artist has used to signify a fiery Earth. To the far right is a triangular-shaped canvas that leans against the wall and is balanced on a point. Flames leap from this canvas across the larger one towards the left side of the work where a piece of upholstered furniture hovers in mid-air. On the wall above the chintz-covered chair is a magnetized metal bar with various objects attached: a knife and fork, a flour sifter, handcuffs, a razor, eye glasses, a watch and a gun. The z-shape of the armature of the chair and the z-shape of metal bar are two halves of a swastika. A tortoise positioned in the center of the large canvas slowly makes its way towards the chair, a symbol of domestic life, threatening to tilt the balance, allowing the flames to engulf the left portion of the canvas. In this work the artist explores dramatic shifts in thinking, specifically, “What was it that caused a person from the bourgeoisie in Germany to become a Nazi?” When does that paradigmatic shift occur? How do we stop it from happening again?

The Meteor Hits Picasso’s Bed (1996-99), inspired by the artist’s childhood memory of a neighbor who was injured while lying in bed by a meteor that fell through her roof, refers to another kind of paradigmatic shift in thinking. One from a series of four works, the painting is a meditation on sudden life-altering events that upturn our world view – in this case, revolutionary innovations in art, whether it be prehistoric cave painting, symbolized by the drawings in the bottom portion of the picture, or Cubism, represented by one of Picasso’s

nudes. *Voodoo Wedding*, painted after the artist visited Haiti and witnessed a Vodou ceremony, playfully refers to our inability to truly see and know everything we are getting into.

Colorful and dynamic, the two works in the exhibition from the artist’s *Speed of Light* series are mostly abstract paintings that reflect upon the limited vision available to the viewer of an artwork. The paintings draw upon the speed of light and Einstein’s theory of relativity – in which one spectator would see an event or fixed point differently from another spectator who is traveling at the speed of light. What the viewer/spectator can’t see when looking at the surface of a canvas is what Rosenquist sees beneath the surface: the sum total of his experience. According to the artist, “The [*Speed of Light*] paintings are about my imagination as to a new view, or a new look at the speed of light. And they also have to do with the whole history of my experience put into a painting.”¹

When asked about whether the selection of the works on view in MAM’s exhibition had any underlying message, the artist responded by telling a story:

After Marcel Duchamp died there was a retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, and because I knew him and had spent a little time with him, they asked Leo Castelli and me to come over and talk about his work. So we get there and immediately Leo slips out the door and leaves me with the television people. And they said, “Mr. Rosenquist, you have been criticized for having political content in your work. Why do you think Marcel Duchamp never had anything political in his work?” So I said, “Stop the cameras,” and I went out the door to a bar across the street and had a drink, then I went back in into the museum and I said, “Roll cameras.” I said, “Ask me the same question.” And they said, “Why do you think Marcel Duchamp never had any political connotations in his work?” And I said, “Because it probably never occurred to him.” Then I said, “Thank you very much,” and I left. So, my point is that rather than letting something that is happening to you or happening to the world interrupt what you are doing, you incorporate it and go on. You can still compose an interesting picture plane. Whether it is political or not I’m still interested in making a dynamic picture.”

Lorie Mertes
Assistant Director for Special Projects / Curator

-Text based on a conversation with the artist February 3, 2006

¹ Sarah Bancroft in *James Rosenquist: A Retrospective* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2003), 230.



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About the Artist

Since the late 1950s, James Rosenquist has been creating an exceptional and consistently intriguing body of work. A leader in the American Pop art movement in the 1960s with contemporaries Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol, Rosenquist drew on the iconography of advertising and the mass media to conjure a sense of contemporary life and the political tenor of the times.

Born in 1933 in Grand Forks, North Dakota, James Rosenquist studied art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts as a teenager and at the University of Minnesota between 1952 and 1954, painting billboards during the summers. In 1955 he moved to New York to study at the Art Students League. He left the school after one year, and in 1957 returned to life as a commercial artist, painting billboards in Times Square and across the city. By 1960, he had quit painting billboards and rented a small studio space in Manhattan where his neighbors included artists Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, and Jack Youngerman.

During this period, Rosenquist, working against the prevailing tide of Abstract Expressionism, developed his own brand of New Realism – a style soon to be called Pop art. Here the artist's early training as a sign painter emerged in his continued use of advertising imagery, commercial colors, and the large scale of his work. In 1962, he had his first solo exhibition at the Green Gallery in New York, and afterward was included in a number of groundbreaking group exhibitions that established Pop art as a movement.

Rosenquist achieved international acclaim with his room-scale painting, *F-111* (1965). In addition to painting, he has produced a vast array of prints, drawings, and collages; his print *Time Dust* (1992) is thought to be the largest print in the world, measuring seven by 35 feet. Rosenquist's visually complex narratives depict specific events, thoughts, or actions through a collage technique. Through his unique brand of imagery, Rosenquist has addressed modern issues and current events, registered antiwar statements, and voiced concern over the social, political, economic, and environmental fate of the planet.



The artist has received numerous honors; he was selected as the Art in America Young Talent Painter in 1963, appointed to a six-year term on the Board of the National Council on the Arts in 1978, nominated as a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1987, named recipient of the Golden Plate Award from the American Academy of Achievement in 1988, and awarded the Chevalier l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Minister of Culture in 1992. In 2002, the Fundación Cristóbal Gabarrón conferred upon him its annual international award for art in recognition of his great contributions to universal culture. Since his first early career retrospectives in 1972 organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, he has been the subject of gallery and museum exhibitions in the U.S. and internationally. He continues to produce large-scale commissions, including the recent three-painting suite *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist* (1997-98) for Deutsche Guggenheim, and has a painting planned for the ceiling of the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. A 40-year retrospective of his work was held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2003 and traveled to the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao in 2004.

Originally from the Midwest and now working in New York and in Florida, where he has been a resident for more than 25 years, Rosenquist has developed a distinctly American voice, yet his work comments upon popular culture from a global perspective. From his early days as a billboard painter to his recent use of abstract painting techniques, Rosenquist has demonstrated his interest in and mastery of texture, color, line, and shape that continues to dazzle audiences and influence younger generations of artists.

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Collection Judy and Sherwood Weiser